

Why People Join Cults

“Dear friends, although I was very eager to write to you about the salvation we share, I felt I had to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints. For certain men whose condemnation was written about long ago have slipped in among you.

(Jude 3-4)

These challenging words, written by Jude to a group of Christians confronting false teachers in the first century, have real relevance today. False teaching has crept in through the windows (the meaning of the Greek text) that Christianity opens out to the world; its entry has gone largely undetected, because the teachers appear genuine.

A true story

Julie (not her real name) grew up in a middle class suburb in middle Australia. She received a standard education and her parents and siblings fully expected that, when she returned home from her trip overseas, she would finally go on to university. Instead, she vanished. Months passed without any contact and her family and friends began to suspect that she had been the subject of foul play. She was barely 21 years old and her behaviour was completely out of character. Enquiries with Australian consular authorities did not reveal anything beyond her departure date. At last a letter arrived. It was in her familiar hand-writing. It stated that she was well and that she had made friends in Manhattan, discovered a new purpose in life and did not plan to return.

Julie’s parents claimed she was not religious, but when I read the letter I suspected something of a spiritual nature had occurred in her life. It sounded as if she had joined a cult. (Over the years I have helped many people involved in one cult movement or another.) I agreed to help the family find out what had happened to her.

I had only recently been a spectator at an open-air rally conducted by the Reverend Sun Myung Moon in Washington DC and my enquiries revealed his organisation had an office and residential accommodation in New York City. References in Julie’s letter suggested a link with this popular movement.

Finding the “Moonies (a generic name for the group, based on their founder’s name) was easy enough. Getting a hearing was something else. Staff at the front door claimed they had never heard of Julie and refused to let me in, even as a casual enquirer. During a second visit I located a fellow-resident who told me Julie lived with her husband in the premises. Husband? Her parents had told me she was single. After passing on a message through this intermediary I was finally admitted and met Julie. She had overcome her reticence and secured approval from her spiritual superiors to speak to me, as a friend of the family.

The story that unfolded was predictable. Julie told me she had arrived in the USA and friends of contacts there had invited her to visit a Unification Church. Once inside, she met fellow-travellers and became convinced the Reverend Moon was on a mission from God. She decided to remain for a while and check out what people were telling her about how their lives had changed. They seemed to be nice enough, caring, genuine, and open about their problems and hopes. She was attracted by their friendliness. Each morning she and the other residents attended a kind of chapel, where they listened to and discussed recordings of Moon's sermons, followed by teaching and training. Within a month she was introduced to a young man named Paul and told she should marry him. Two months later she joined several thousand other men and women connected with the movement and exchanged marriage vows. She had never seen such a large wedding. No one had until then. Julie told me she knew almost nothing about Paul, but that she hoped they would get to know one another better. They were not yet living together. "We will learn to love one another." They considered their marriage an essential part of demonstrating obedience to the teaching and leadership of the Reverend Moon. They had agreed to start a family as soon as they were permitted to consummate the marriage.

I asked Julie whether she thought about returning to Australia. She obviously missed her family, but she replied with an emphatic "No". The Moonies were her new family. I tried to talk to her about what she was being taught, but she refused to discuss it.

What made an otherwise sensible young woman like Julie forsake all she knew and abandon herself, her hopes, aspirations and life-long relationships to join a religious cult she had never heard of before visiting America? Her story has been repeated over and over again. Teenagers and young adults regularly disappear, drop out of sight, become immersed in unlikely (and sometimes dangerous), delusive cult teaching that extols and worships individuals and offers dimensions of spiritual fulfilment they seek in vain in traditional religion. And what was the Unification Church? Who was Moon?

The Unification Church (the Moonies) was founded in Korea in 1954 by Sun Myung Moon and relocated to the USA in 1959. Moon claimed that when he was only 16 years of age Jesus Christ had appeared to him and told him he had been chosen to establish the Kingdom of God on earth (with him as its titular head, of course).

According to Moon, all religions will eventually be abolished, except for the Unification Church. All languages except Korean will disappear. His followers must comply with set teachings and accept his moral and spiritual authority, status and belief system. Marriages must be arranged by the Unification Church in order to be "eternally valid".

Moonies do not believe that Jesus Christ was God. Not do they believe in the Virgin birth as taught by the Bible. The concept of the Trinity is rejected. Moon teaches that the Holy Spirit is a female spirit. The Unification Church rejects the death and resurrection of Christ for a lost world. Instead, Moon claims Jesus lied to his disciples when he told them that he was flesh and blood. Moonies believe Jesus failed in his God-given mission and that the plan would now be brought to fruition by none other than Moon himself, and his organisation.

Why do people join cults?

When people think all religions are the same, when personal faith in a living, loving God is missing from a person's life, there remains just a short step to looking somewhere else for religious expression and personal identity. Millions of people get fed up with effete denominations that cannot provide meaningful responses to their life needs and so they turn to other faiths.

The reality is that cults such as the Moonies serve a range of purposes for individuals (especially those who are lonely or single), including a sense of belonging and community where personal and shared values are focussed, affirmed and reinforced. I have met people claiming to be God. I have dealt with individuals making claims that God had sent them to re-establish His Kingdom, but none has ever had the drawing power of the Moonies, Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons or a gaggle of occult and New Age groups. What makes them different and how can we reach out to those caught up in their webs?

People are spiritually hungry. Cult deception is ubiquitous and real. Members range from door-knocking religious salesmen who focus on world conditions, family break-up and social issues to people who are troubled by modern living and are attracted to alternative lifestyles, escapism and Messianic appearances.

However, the Holy Spirit is able to break down deceptions and false imaginations; God can use us to bring people to a personal knowledge of Jesus Christ. Our "weapons" are not human arguments but spiritual authorities (2 Corinthians 10:3-5).

Common characteristics of the cults

Social scientists define cults as groups that deviate from cultural norms. "Old" and "new" cults all share the same basic characteristics (read Matthew 24:23-24, 1 Timothy 4:1-2 and 2 Corinthians 11:13, 14).

Most cults have a *different* Jesus; a *different* Gospel and a *different* Holy Spirit (2 Corinthians 11:4). They deny the Biblical God. They refuse to believe that Jesus Christ came in the flesh (1 John 4:3). They reject the atonement, or work of Christ on the cross to bring us back to God (2 Peter 2:1). They refuse to acknowledge the power of godly living (2 Timothy 3:1-5). They abandon sound doctrine, which they replace with fables (2 Timothy 4:3-4). They spurn God-given authorities in the Body of Christ.

Cults add to the Word of God - often with a book of their own (the Bible is ignored, or adherents are taught they need a new revelation to understand it). They concurrently subtract from the Word of God (subtract from solid teaching and from the simple faith teaching that underpins Christianity); add new requirements for salvation, including essential belief regimes and works; subtract from the glory of God by elevating man to godhood; and add new interpretations, emphases and applications. To someone who is in pain (often for genuine reasons) the cults are a magnet of acceptance, inclusion, understanding and strength in time of trouble.

Many cults are identifiable by the characteristics of their leaders. They claim an exclusive ministry, revelation or position of authority given by God. Members look to them for guidance in all they do, including personal decisions, such as marriage and career. Many cults claim they have no clergy, no paid ministry, no priests, that all are equal, however there is usually an unhealthy emphasis on obedience and submission to the group's authority structure and criticism is seen as rebellion against that authority.

Cults usually insist they are the sole true church (or the restored church), with the only true revelation, such as the only dates for the future (eg the return of Christ and Armageddon). Only those who are prepared to be strong, committed members are admitted to the group; sometimes only after a period of probation. Nevertheless, most cults are actively evangelistic (some make proselytization, or winning of converts, a condition of membership). Dissent or questioning of the group's teaching is discouraged. Personal views and free will are subsumed for the sake of the "group". Unquestioning attitudes are seen as ideal. Loss of identity follows. Relatives say they no longer recognise the person. Relationships with friends, family, spouses, children and parents are broken or curtailed. An "us-verses-them" mentality leads to isolation from the community in general. Outsiders are seen as belonging to the devil. Enemies can be: former family and friends, the government, media, education systems, hospitals and churches. Persecution (or a belief that persecution is imminent) is common – some welcome opposition from outside as evidence of their martyr status; others withdraw. Those who remain involved with these institutions do so as a "means to an end". Paranoia leads to belief that "others" are trying to take over the group.

Cults are also identifiable by their attitudes towards mainstream churches. Members are critical towards other churches. Self-righteousness characterises the cult member, who rejects all questioning but feels free to judge the beliefs of others, as "true Christians".

Cults use manipulation to keep people in their ranks, including threats of divine punishment, loss of reward, being shunned by family and friends. Great emphasis is placed on loyalty to the group and its teachings. Members' lives become absorbed in the activities of the group, with little time to think for themselves, often because of physical and emotional exhaustion. Total control is exercised over the private lives of members, eg through communal living and reporting on one another (in the guise of ensuring group stability and protecting against "the enemy"). Guilt comes from infringing even minor rules. Regimentation is common. Attempts to leave are met with threats. Some groups insist on pledges and oaths of secrecy. Participants feel intimidated by oaths they have taken. Those who leave are coerced back into the group.

Cult members are expected to give substantial financial support (all they can) to the group, eg signing over their property; buying magazines, books and tapes, in addition to giving significant amounts of their income and time to the "ministry". At the same time, they publicly deride churches that take up tithes and offerings, inferring they do not do this. There is usually little accountability for income received.

Cult members lose their ability to function as members of a broad society, make decisions for themselves and relate to those who do not live the way they do. Their

lives come to be revolved around the group. Members are made to feel guilty about everything they did before joining the group, and grateful for being accepted, forgiven and allowed to participate in the elect few destined to enjoy eternal life and revelation of the true meaning of existence. Cult members are often required to give up medical treatment in the name of “faith”. The groups have strong systems of rules governing personal lifestyles.

Many cults place strong emphasis on teaching. People want to follow leaders who know what they are doing and what they believe. The major cult groups emphasise knowledge, training and personal application of belief.

Faced with such a grim picture, it is a wonder such groups thrive. In fact, the factors that lead people to join cults are multi-faceted. They include spiritual hunger; searching for people who care, loneliness, the need to feel part of a group (including being dependent on it) and a desire for support in difficult times. Membership provides a sense of mission, purpose, security, uniqueness and satisfaction.

Other elements include concern about the future, fear of what is happening in the world, disaffection with traditional Christianity, rejection of liberalism in the Christian church (which de-emphasises absolute truth and leads to vacuums of belief), rejection of traditional authority structures and spiritual abuse in churches. Leaders are visible, charismatic, authoritative and able to be “touched”, but aloof enough to retain an aura of holiness, in some cases divinity. A high proportion of people who join cults have walked away from God because Christianity as they interpret it is not relevant to their circumstances and they are bored with what they see in ecclesiastical traditions.

Finally there is always a strong element of spiritual delusion (2 Thessalonians 2:10-12). Cult growth is not just an interest psychological phenomenon. The Bible teaches that it is attributable to demonic powers at work in the world.

Reaching those who are caught up in delusion

Christians who are eager to present the living Christ in a modern world and reach out to friends and family members drawn into cult structures should direct their allegiance to Christ alone (1 Corinthians 7:23). They should be acutely aware of Biblical truth. They should seek to minister to the needs that led their friends or family members into the cult in the first place, pray for them, depend on the Holy Spirit to give them a revelation of Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 11: ref), be prepared to reason with them (Acts 17:17) and not attack them (thereby creating walls against communication). They should educate themselves in the area of cult mind control techniques used by cult groups, through books and seminars, and love them regardless of negative aspects of the struggles they are facing.

Jesus Christ came to set people free. As we seek to be a relevant church in a changing and mixed-up world we need to focus on the power of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, to transform the lives of all who come to him. “He able to save them to the uttermost (Heb 7:25).